



The Role of Islamic Boarding Schools in Community Economic Empowerment: A Case Study of Mertak Tombok Village, Central Lombok, Indonesia

Baiq Muniah¹, Habibul Umam Taquiuddin^{2*}, Muhammad Yakub³

¹Fakultas Ekonomi, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama NTB, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*) in fostering community-based economic empowerment in rural Indonesia. The research focuses on Mertak Tombok Village, Central Lombok, where the *Pondok Pesantren* serves as both a religious institution and an agent of socio-economic transformation. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation involving *kiai* (religious leaders), students, and local residents. The findings indicate that the *pondok pesantren* plays a pivotal role in developing community entrepreneurship through education, social training, and the establishment of productive enterprises such as agriculture, livestock, and handicraft cooperatives. Its leadership model—anchored in Islamic ethical values—has fostered a culture of self-reliance and collaboration among local residents. Nevertheless, challenges remain in managerial capacity, market access, and the integration of modern business practices. The study concludes that the effectiveness of pesantren-based empowerment depends on three critical factors: institutional leadership, socio-religious legitimacy, and the synergy between religious education and local economic initiatives. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on Islamic social entrepreneurship and sustainable community development in developing regions.

KEYWORDS:

Islamic boarding school; economic empowerment; community development; social entrepreneurship; Lombok; Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*) have long served as foundational institutions in Indonesia's educational and socio-religious landscape. Beyond their traditional role in providing Islamic education, pesantren have increasingly emerged as centers for community empowerment, social transformation, and local economic development. This evolution reflects the broader shift in Indonesia's rural development paradigm, which recognizes religious institutions as strategic agents in poverty alleviation and human capital formation. According to the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2023), Indonesia hosts over 36,000 pesantren, the majority of which operate in rural and semi-rural areas, making them essential nodes for community-based economic growth.

The integration of economic empowerment into pesantren activities aligns with Islamic teachings that emphasize productivity, self-reliance (*ikhthiar*), and social justice (*adl*). In many regions, pesantren have established cooperatives, agricultural ventures, and vocational programs to address unemployment and improve local welfare. As noted by Ascarya (2020), the application of Islamic economic principles within pesantren enables the creation of moral-based entrepreneurship that balances material success with ethical responsibility. Such initiatives transform pesantren into community enterprises (*social enterprises*) that combine spiritual guidance with socioeconomic functions.

However, despite their potential, many pesantren-led empowerment programs remain constrained by limited managerial capacity, inadequate market access, and insufficient integration with modern

business models. Prior research (Hidayat & Sulaiman, 2021) has identified that most pesantren initiatives operate informally without structured financial management or external collaboration. As a result, their long-term sustainability often depends on individual leadership rather than institutional governance. Moreover, while pesantren enjoy strong legitimacy within local communities, their economic initiatives frequently struggle to compete in commercial markets due to scale and branding limitations.

Mertak Tombok Village in Central Lombok exemplifies this phenomenon. The *Pondok Pesantren* in this area has implemented various empowerment activities—including agriculture, livestock rearing, and creative microenterprises—that directly involve residents. These initiatives have contributed to improving livelihoods while fostering community solidarity under religious values. Nevertheless, challenges persist, particularly in terms of business management, production consistency, and the adoption of modern marketing systems.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in the framework of *Islamic community-based empowerment*, which views economic participation as both a social duty and a spiritual obligation. As articulated by Rahardjo (2022), Islamic community empowerment combines *ta'dib* (education), *ijtihad* (innovation), and *amal jama'i* (collective action) to promote inclusive development. From a socio-economic perspective, this approach resonates with the principles of social capital theory (Putnam, 2000), where trust, networks, and shared values form the foundation of collective economic advancement. Within this framework, pesantren act as moral entrepreneurs who mobilize religious authority to enhance local capacity, reduce dependency, and foster cooperative productivity.

This research aims to analyze how pesantren in Mertak Tombok Village contribute to economic empowerment and to identify the institutional, cultural, and operational factors influencing their effectiveness. Specifically, the study investigates (1) the strategies used by pesantren to empower local communities, (2) the challenges they face in implementing economic programs, and (3) the implications of pesantren-based empowerment for sustainable rural development. Through this inquiry, the study contributes to the expanding discourse on Islamic social entrepreneurship, highlighting how faith-based institutions can serve as catalysts for economic and social transformation in developing contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*) in Indonesia increasingly highlights their transformation from purely educational institutions into agents of socio-economic change. Historically, pesantren have played a pivotal role in shaping local community identity through religious instruction, moral development, and leadership training. However, in the past two decades, their function has expanded beyond spiritual education toward community empowerment, particularly in rural and underdeveloped regions. Scholars such as Azra (2020) and Asy'arie (2022) emphasize that this transformation reflects a paradigm shift in Islamic education, where pesantren are envisioned as holistic centers for knowledge dissemination, entrepreneurship, and social welfare.

From a theoretical standpoint, community empowerment is often conceptualized as a multidimensional process that enhances individuals' and groups' capacities to make strategic life choices in a participatory and sustainable manner. According to Zimmerman (2020), empowerment involves three interrelated dimensions: intrapersonal (self-efficacy and perceived control), interactional (critical awareness and social participation), and behavioral (collective action and engagement in economic or political processes). When applied within the context of Islamic boarding schools, empowerment encompasses spiritual, educational, and economic components that together strengthen community autonomy and resilience.

The intersection between Islamic education and economic empowerment is best understood through the framework of *Islamic social entrepreneurship*. This approach integrates entrepreneurial

principles with Islamic ethical foundations, prioritizing social benefit (*maslahah*) over profit maximization. [Ascarya \(2020\)](#) argues that Islamic entrepreneurship derives its legitimacy from the *maqasid al-shariah*—the objectives of Islamic law that promote welfare, justice, and the preservation of life, intellect, and wealth. Thus, pesantren-based economic activities, such as cooperatives, microfinance units, or agricultural programs, are not merely profit-oriented but are designed to fulfill social and moral responsibilities toward the community.

Several studies have examined the socio-economic role of pesantren in empowering local communities. [Hidayat and Sulaiman \(2021\)](#) found that pesantren in East Java successfully initiated community farming cooperatives that increased local income and reduced youth unemployment. Similarly, [Hasanah and Wahid \(2022\)](#) observed that pesantren-led microenterprises in West Nusa Tenggara enhanced women's participation in local markets and fostered collective economic independence. These findings demonstrate that pesantren's moral authority and institutional trust enable them to mobilize community participation effectively. Nonetheless, the literature also notes persistent challenges in financial management, business formalization, and the adoption of modern marketing strategies ([Rahman & Rahim, 2022](#)).

The relationship between religion and entrepreneurship in Indonesia is further elucidated through the concept of *faith-based social capital*. [Putnam \(2000\)](#) defines social capital as the networks, trust, and norms that facilitate collective action and cooperation. Within Islamic communities, pesantren cultivate social capital through moral education, community solidarity, and shared religious values. This social capital, when leveraged for economic purposes, generates cooperative enterprises that are both culturally embedded and socially inclusive. [Suryani and Hendrawan \(2021\)](#) highlight that such embeddedness enhances market legitimacy and fosters long-term sustainability, especially when combined with innovation and adaptability.

Institutional theory also provides a useful lens for understanding the pesantren's evolving role in local development. As noted by [Isenberg \(2011\)](#), institutional ecosystems—comprising government agencies, financial institutions, and cultural organizations—determine the success of entrepreneurship and innovation. In Indonesia, pesantren often function as intermediaries linking state development programs with grassroots communities. Through training, microcredit facilitation, and cooperative partnerships, pesantren help translate policy objectives into locally relevant initiatives. However, as [Santoso and Purwanti \(2022\)](#) observe, many pesantren lack the administrative capacity and professional management systems needed to sustain long-term economic ventures, leading to dependency on individual leadership charisma ([Indriani, 2025](#)).

Empirical evidence further supports the significance of integrating digital technology into pesantren-based economic initiatives. [Taufik and Nugroho \(2023\)](#) demonstrate that digital literacy strongly correlates with improved marketing performance among Indonesian MSMEs, including religiously affiliated enterprises. Digital tools allow pesantren to expand outreach, modernize financial management, and engage broader consumer networks. Yet, resistance to change and limited access to digital infrastructure remain barriers to full adoption. Bridging this gap requires both policy support and curriculum reform that embeds entrepreneurship and digital skills within Islamic education ([Ropiqi, 2023](#)).

In summary, the literature converges on three essential determinants of successful pesantren-based economic empowerment: leadership legitimacy, institutional capacity, and innovation adaptability. Leadership legitimacy ensures community trust and compliance; institutional capacity provides the managerial and administrative structure necessary for sustaining programs; and innovation adaptability allows pesantren to respond to changing socio-economic and technological conditions. By synthesizing these elements, pesantren can effectively serve as localized development agents that align spiritual guidance with economic progress. The present study builds upon this theoretical foundation to examine how the pesantren in Mertak Tombok Village operationalizes these concepts in practice, thereby contributing to the academic discourse on faith-based economic empowerment and sustainable rural development in Indonesia.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design aimed at exploring and understanding the role of *pondok pesantren* in community-based economic empowerment within Mertak Tombok Village, Central Lombok, Indonesia. The qualitative approach was selected to capture the depth and complexity of social phenomena associated with religious institutions and their influence on local economic activities. As [Creswell and Poth \(2018\)](#) explain, qualitative research enables the researcher to interpret meanings derived from participants' experiences and to explore processes that cannot be adequately represented through quantitative measurement. In this context, the study sought to uncover how Islamic values, institutional leadership, and community participation intersect to shape economic empowerment practices initiated by the pesantren.

The research was conducted at one of the established pesantren in Mertak Tombok Village, which has been actively engaged in various economic activities including agriculture, livestock, and small-scale trade. The site was selected purposively due to its ongoing involvement in community development programs and its reputation for integrating religious education with local economic initiatives. The pesantren serves not only as a center for religious instruction but also as a hub for collective entrepreneurship among residents and students (*santri*). Its programs reflect the broader movement of pesantren-based empowerment promoted by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs and local government agencies.

Data collection relied on multiple sources to ensure methodological triangulation. Three primary techniques were employed: in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with key informants including the *kiai* (religious leader), two teachers involved in entrepreneurship training, three community members who participate in pesantren economic programs, and one representative from the local cooperative office. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was recorded with participants' consent. The questions explored the nature of pesantren-led economic activities, strategies for empowerment, challenges faced in implementation, and perceptions of community impact. Observations were conducted during agricultural and craft-based training sessions as well as during market days, allowing the researcher to document interactions between pesantren administrators and local participants. Supporting documents, such as business plans, financial records, and community reports, were analyzed to corroborate verbal information and to identify patterns of institutional practice.

The analytical process followed the interactive model of [Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña \(2014\)](#), comprising three interrelated stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, transcripts and field notes were carefully read and coded to identify recurring themes related to leadership, institutional management, Islamic values, and economic outcomes. The coding process involved both inductive and deductive reasoning, allowing the researcher to remain open to emerging themes while aligning findings with established theoretical frameworks. In the data display phase, findings were organized into thematic matrices that connected informants' perspectives with observable practices. This step enabled the identification of converging and diverging viewpoints among stakeholders. Finally, in the conclusion drawing stage, the researcher synthesized the patterns and constructed interpretive narratives that linked empirical evidence with the theoretical constructs of Islamic community empowerment and social entrepreneurship ([Salmiati & Martayadi, 2023](#)).

To enhance research credibility and trustworthiness, several validation strategies were employed. Source triangulation compared information from different groups of respondents, while methodological triangulation combined interviews, observations, and document analysis to cross-verify findings. Member checking was conducted by presenting preliminary interpretations to key informants, particularly the *kiai* and cooperative representatives, to ensure accuracy and contextual

relevance. Dependability was maintained through consistent data collection procedures and detailed documentation of analytical decisions. Confirmability was achieved by maintaining an audit trail that recorded the researcher's reflections, analytical memos, and decision-making rationale throughout the study. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the research context, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar environments.

Ethical considerations were strictly upheld throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the objectives of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing respondents' identities and securing all recorded data (Mufaddhal, Z. 2025). The research design adhered to the ethical guidelines established by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia, emphasizing respect, transparency, and non-maleficence in social inquiry.

The qualitative descriptive design adopted in this study allows for an interpretive understanding of how pesantren-led initiatives contribute to economic empowerment. It does not seek statistical generalization but rather aims to generate theoretical insights and practical implications. As Yin (2018) argues, case-oriented qualitative research enables analytical generalization that enriches theory by grounding it in context-specific. Through this methodology, the study captures the dynamic interplay between religion, leadership, and socio-economic participation, providing a comprehensive understanding of how Islamic boarding schools function as catalysts for rural economic development and social transformation in contemporary Indonesia.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Institutional Role of Pesantren in Economic Empowerment

The findings reveal that the *pondok pesantren* in Mertak Tombok Village plays a multifaceted role that extends beyond its traditional educational function. The institution serves as a center for spiritual formation, moral education, and economic transformation, simultaneously shaping community behavior and livelihood practices. The *kiai*, as both spiritual leader and community mobilizer, embodies dual authority—religious and socio-economic—that legitimizes pesantren-led initiatives. Through regular sermons, study circles (*halaqah*), and community gatherings, the pesantren integrates Islamic values of hard work (*ijtihad*), honesty (*amanah*), and collective responsibility (*ukhuwah islamiyah*) into daily economic activities. This moral foundation builds trust between pesantren administrators and community members, a key component of social capital that facilitates participation in joint economic programs.

Empirical observation shows that the pesantren has initiated several productive ventures, including small-scale livestock farming, organic vegetable cultivation, and handicraft training for women. These activities are structured as community learning programs that combine vocational instruction with religious ethics. As a result, residents not only acquire practical skills but also internalize moral values that guide economic behavior. This pattern mirrors the *Islamic social entrepreneurship* model described by Ascarya (2020), where enterprise development is grounded in spiritual principles that aim to achieve both material prosperity and communal welfare.

The pesantren's credibility as a faith-based institution enhances its ability to mobilize community participation and attract external support from local government and private donors. However, the findings also indicate that the scope and sustainability of these programs depend heavily on the leadership capacity of the *kiai* and the institutional management of the pesantren. Without systematic planning, documentation, or professional staff, many initiatives rely on informal coordination, making them vulnerable to leadership transitions or financial shortfalls. This aligns with the observations of Hidayat and Sulaiman (2021), who note that pesantren-led projects often succeed in the short term but struggle with continuity due to limited administrative structure.

Forms and Impact of Empowerment Activities

The pesantren's empowerment programs encompass three major dimensions: economic education, skills training, and cooperative enterprise development. Economic education is embedded in daily religious instruction, where students and residents are taught the value of productivity, thrift, and ethical business practices. Skills training focuses on practical activities such as farming, animal husbandry, and handicraft production. Cooperative enterprises, meanwhile, function as small business groups that facilitate collective production and marketing (Duc, L. D. T., & Mujahida, S.2024).

Interviews with participants reveal that these programs have generated tangible benefits for local households. Women involved in handicraft production reported increased income stability and improved financial management skills. Male participants engaged in livestock farming experienced enhanced productivity through the pesantren's provision of shared facilities and group mentoring. Moreover, the pesantren's emphasis on *barakah* (spiritual blessing) as an intrinsic motivation fosters long-term commitment among members, even in the absence of formal incentives. This integration of religious motivation with economic practice exemplifies the concept of *faith-driven entrepreneurship* described by Hasanah and Wahid (2022), where moral purpose complements material pursuit.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study identifies several structural challenges. Market access remains limited, as most products are sold locally without branding or online promotion. Financial management is conducted manually, and record-keeping is inconsistent. Participants also report difficulties in scaling production due to insufficient capital and a lack of marketing expertise. These findings echo the conclusions of Rahman and Rahim (2022), who found that digital illiteracy and informal operations are key constraints for MSMEs, including those associated with religious institutions. Thus, while the pesantren's empowerment programs have successfully built community capacity, their economic impact could be amplified through digital integration, partnerships with cooperatives, and training in business management.

The Role of Islamic Values and Social Capital

A central finding of this study is the crucial role of Islamic values in shaping economic participation and cooperation. The pesantren's moral authority generates high levels of trust, which in turn forms the basis of effective social capital. Participants frequently cite religious motivation—such as *seeking Allah's pleasure (ridha Allah)* and contributing to communal welfare—as their primary reason for engaging in economic activities. This moral dimension reinforces collective discipline and reduces opportunistic behavior, thereby lowering transaction costs and strengthening mutual accountability.

The trust-based relationships cultivated within the pesantren community also enhance social cohesion and resilience. During interviews, local farmers noted that cooperation under the pesantren's guidance reduces conflict and encourages resource sharing. This supports Putnam's (2000) argument that social capital—manifested through trust, norms, and networks—plays an essential role in fostering cooperative development. Moreover, the pesantren's inclusive leadership model, which involves both students and community members, promotes social integration across educational and occupational boundaries.

However, the findings also suggest that social capital, while valuable, is not sufficient to ensure sustainability without institutionalization. As Santoso and Purwanti (2022) emphasize, informal trust networks must be complemented by organizational systems and financial accountability to prevent dependency and ensure scalability. The pesantren's moral legitimacy should therefore be supported by administrative capacity building, documentation systems, and external partnerships that can sustain empowerment efforts beyond personal leadership.

Challenges and Strategic Opportunities

Several challenges were identified that influence the effectiveness of pesantren-led empowerment. These include limited managerial expertise, lack of access to digital technology, and minimal collaboration with formal financial institutions. The pesantren's reliance on voluntary labor and small donations constrains capital accumulation and restricts investment in production infrastructure.

Furthermore, gender participation, although improving, remains unequal due to cultural expectations that prioritize men in leadership and resource control.

To address these issues, strategic opportunities lie in three areas. First, enhancing digital literacy and e-commerce participation would expand market reach for pesantren products and services. Second, partnerships with local cooperatives and government programs could provide access to training, credit, and marketing networks. Third, institutionalizing entrepreneurship education within the pesantren curriculum would equip students with managerial and financial skills that can be applied both within and beyond the pesantren environment. As [Taufik and Nugroho \(2023\)](#) argue, integrating digital and managerial competencies within traditional institutions is essential for fostering inclusive and adaptive economic ecosystems.

Collectively, these findings indicate that the pesantren in Mertak Tombok has successfully initiated foundational empowerment practices rooted in Islamic ethics and community trust. Its ongoing challenge is to transform these informal practices into structured, sustainable systems capable of scaling impact. The pesantren thus embodies a transitional model of *Islamic social enterprise*—a hybrid institution that balances moral legitimacy with emerging demands for professional management and digital innovation. Through continuous adaptation and institutional strengthening, pesantren can remain vital actors in achieving Indonesia's vision of inclusive and faith-driven economic development.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*) hold a strategic position in advancing community-based economic empowerment, particularly in rural areas such as Mertak Tombok Village in Central Lombok. The pesantren examined in this research demonstrates that faith-based institutions can effectively serve as catalysts for socio-economic transformation when religious values, leadership legitimacy, and participatory community engagement converge. Through a combination of religious instruction, vocational training, and cooperative enterprise, the pesantren successfully fosters self-reliance, skill enhancement, and moral discipline among community members. These empowerment practices not only improve household income and local productivity but also reinforce the spiritual and ethical foundations of economic activity.

Nevertheless, several structural limitations hinder the full realization of pesantren-led empowerment. The findings highlight that the absence of managerial systems, digital marketing tools, and institutionalized business frameworks constrains scalability and long-term sustainability. To enhance their impact, pesantren must strengthen organizational capacity, adopt digital innovation, and establish partnerships with government agencies, cooperatives, and private institutions. By doing so, pesantren can transition from informal community movements to structured social enterprises capable of driving inclusive development.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the growing discourse on *Islamic social entrepreneurship* by demonstrating how moral capital and social trust can be transformed into productive economic assets. Practically, it underscores the potential of pesantren as development partners in achieving Indonesia's national agenda for sustainable and equitable economic growth. Future research should explore comparative models of pesantren empowerment across different regions and examine the integration of digital literacy and entrepreneurship education into pesantren curricula to strengthen their role in the modern economy.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the publication of this study.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the paper.

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